



Susan Bysiewicz
SECRETARY OF THE STATE
CONNECTICUT

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- PRESS RELEASE -

CONNECTICUT AND WASHINGTON SECRETARIES OF THE STATE LAUNCH NATIONAL BI-PARTISAN CAMPAIGN TO OVERTURN V.A. BAN ON VOTER REGISTRATION DRIVES

SECRETARIES OF STATE ACROSS THE COUNTRY JOIN BYSIEWICZ AND REED IN
ACTION TO PROTECT MILITARY VETERANS' RIGHT TO VOTE

HARTFORD: Connecticut Secretary of the State Susan Bysiewicz (D) and Washington State Secretary of State Sam Reed (R) have launched a national bipartisan effort among Secretaries of State to overturn a May 5th directive prohibiting staff from participating in voter registration drives for patients and residents of hospitals, nursing homes, rehabilitation centers and homeless shelters administered by the federal Veterans Administration.

In a letter to V.A. Secretary James Peake, Bysiewicz and Reed wrote, "As a practical matter, voter registration drives have historically been a critical outreach tool for veterans in facilities to ensure that they get the opportunity to register to vote. Many veterans simply are not able to get out on their own, rendering registration much more difficult. Likewise, the longstanding practice of allowing facility employees to assist veterans in registering to vote has provided valuable assistance to veterans in need."

So far, a bipartisan coalition of 10 Secretaries of State have signed onto the letter, representing states such as Ohio, Minnesota, Vermont, Montana, Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, Maine, Kansas, and Washington State(a complete list is attached).

“The practice and policy of banning voter registration drives at veterans facilities is a slap in the face to the people that have served, put their lives on the line and scarified the most for our fundamental freedoms,” said Bysiewicz. “It does not matter whether you are a Democrat or a Republican, anyone can see that this policy is wrong and needs to be changed immediately. We are continuing to reach out to our colleagues across the country to raise awareness about this alarming violation of our veterans’ rights.”

“Our state is holding its Primary Election in just a few weeks, and the November General Election is less than four months away,” Reed said. “It’s critical that we protect our veterans’ right to vote and let their voices be heard through their ballots. It’s a sad irony that the federal agency that is supposed to help our nation’s veterans all of a sudden isn’t very helpful when it comes to allowing them to exercise one of America’s basic rights.”

Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, in a formal legal opinion released today, said, “In my view, this directive should be withdrawn and revised immediately by the DVA (Department of Veterans Affairs) because it is flawed and unfounded in law and fatally unfair in its restraint on veterans’ rights. The DVA directive cited by officials as a reason to constrain voting registration or education is confusing and misleading. Relying on the Hatch Act to limit such efforts is disingenuous and even deceptive. It may chill and discourage legitimate exercise of rights. It is unfounded legally and unjustified as policy. Its main effect is to inhibit veteran voting.”

On July 3rd Secretary Bysiewicz and Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, wrote to Secretary of Veterans Affairs James B. Peake to request that Secretary Bysiewicz and elections officials be granted access to the facilities for the purposes of distributing voter registration materials and instructing residents on the use of newly-implemented voting machines.

“The Secretary of the State was recently blocked from access by local Veterans Health Administration (VHA) officials, who have subsequently stated that the request remains under review,” wrote Blumenthal and Bysiewicz. “We seek your timely assurance within the next 10 days that the Secretary’s request and other similar requests by state and local election officials will be granted. Also, as this episode demonstrates, the VHA must clarify its policy to ensure that election officials across the country be permitted to assist our nation’s heroes in exercising the very democratic rights that they have sacrificed so much to preserve.”

“The Directive should not be construed to bar nonpartisan voter registration and education activities conducted by state and local election officials in furtherance of their official duties, which pose no significant risk of partisanship, disruption or violation of the Hatch Act,” Blumenthal and Bysiewicz continued. “To prohibit such access would be detrimental to both veterans and the state and local election officials who seek to assist them, while serving no valid institutional objectives of the VHA.”

“We respectfully request that you instruct officials with responsibility for the administration of VHA facilities located in Connecticut that they immediately grant the Secretary’s request so that she may provide assistance to veterans without further delay.”

On June 30th, Secretary Bysiewicz was joined by Attorney General Blumenthal, veterans and veterans' advocates at the Veterans Affairs Hospital in West Haven to blast the policy, register veterans to vote, and distribute information on the state's new voting machines at the facility. Secretary Bysiewicz was able to register 10 veterans to vote outside the facility Monday afternoon.

On July 2nd, Secretary Reed wrote to Washington State's congressional delegation urging its members to take action to ensure veterans were not denied the right to register to vote. According to Secretary Reed, "Assisting patients with voter registration would not harm the appearance of neutrality and it would not violate the Hatch Act. Assisting veterans would not interfere with patient medical care."

"In addition many veterans who are already registered to vote are at risk of losing this precious constitutional right by not updating their voter registration information..." Reed continued. "Assisting our veterans with voter registration is the least our country can do after all they have scarified for our nation's freedoms."

Nationally, it is estimated that more than 100,000 military veterans live in federal V.A. facilities. The current V.A. ban on voter registration drive contradicts an executive order under the Clinton Administration which designated the V.A. a "motor-voter" agency whose staff were required to assist military veterans in their care register to vote.

Secretaries of State joining the national action:

Susan Bysiewicz (D)	CT
Sam Reed (R)	WA
Jennifer Brunner (D)	OH
Brad Johnson (R)	MT
Deb Markowitz (D)	VT
Ralph Mollis (D)	RI
Mark Ritchie (D)	MN
Ron Thornburgh (R)	KS
Bill Gardner (D)	NH
Matt Dunlap (D)	ME

July 10, 2008

The Honorable James P. Peake
United State Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue, NW
Washington, D.C. 20420

Dear Secretary Peake:

We, the undersigned, as Chief Elections Officials in our respective states, are writing to urge you to change VHA Directive 2008-025 (May 5, 2008) to allow nonpartisan voter

registration drives at federally funded nursing homes, rehabilitation centers and homeless shelters and to allow employees at these facilities to assist veterans in registering to vote.

Title 38 of the Code of Federal Regulations, Section 17.33, provides that no patient in the Department of Veterans Affairs medical care system shall be denied legal rights solely by virtue of being voluntarily admitted or involuntarily committed, including the right to register and vote. As a practical matter, voter registration drives have historically been a critical outreach tool for veterans in facilities to ensure that they get the opportunity to register to vote. Many veterans simply are not able to get out on their own, rendering registration much more difficult. Likewise, the longstanding practice of allowing facility employees to assist veterans in registering to vote has provided valuable assistance to veterans in need.

At this time in our history, as so many brave men and women have stepped forward to defend our country in the “Global War on Terror,” it seems only appropriate that we do all we can to help our veterans. We know that you share our concern for America’s veterans and our desire to make sure that they are guaranteed the franchise that they have fought so hard to protect for us all.

We thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Susan Bysiewicz
Secretary of the State, Connecticut

Sam Reed
Secretary of State, Washington

Co-signers:

Jennifer Brunner
Secretary of State, Ohio
Brad Johnson
Secretary of State, Montana
Deborah Markowitz
Secretary of State, Vermont
Matt Dunlap
Secretary of State, Maine
Mark Ritchie
Secretary of State, Minnesota
Ron Thornburgh
Secretary of State, Kansas
Bill Gardner
Secretary of State, New Hampshire